

WHAT PUZZLED BALLADUNE.

Strangers were numerous in Balladune, a small township in Western Queensland, though once upon a time the residents had indulged in the peaceful life of a village, and locomotives carrying long trains of carriages full of passengers with money to spend. Of course this prospective railway was not to go past Balladune, which was to remain for ever a quiet little town, and was in consequence. But these fond hopes were born but to die young. Trade somehow shifted further away, and the railway never came. Those who had specially invested in town lots were unable to realize, and Balladune settled down, discontented enough, to stagnation and a weekly coach.

Balladune, therefore, presented no attractions for strangers to visit it. Attempts had indeed been made, on more than one occasion, to institute half-yearly races and a pastoral show, but they came to nothing. The coach-fare even kept away any poor players who might otherwise have come to take in a really hay-corn in the back-blocks, and the arrival of the said coach was the only local attraction.

It was therefore with mingled surprise and admiration that the inhabitants, who systematically turned out in force on these occasions, saw a stout, pleasant-faced, well-dressed gentleman alight from the box-seat.

The coachman, upon being at once interviewed, stated that he believed the passenger had come up by train to Mount Division, the hotel at which he had put him down with the railway, and that, so far as he was concerned, he found him a thundering good sort, and he wished he always had one of the same brand on the box with him. Of the stranger's business he knew absolutely nothing.

It was generally felt that the coachman had told the truth, for he was a man of no importance, a personage to be feared, but not to be trusted. It was also considered that the stranger, who had charge of the peace of the township, would not be a person of low character, as it was a general election being then pending, the stranger was going to run for a seat.

Meanwhile the gentleman under discussion, who was the hotel-keeper's somewhat well-known name of John Smith, did nothing to hasten his decision to accept the district or otherwise. He simply waited for the burning question of the day. What had brought him to Balladune? He had left Sydney on the weather, the dust and the fall of silver, but not one word escaped by which he could be "placed." In appearance he was equally non-committal. He might have been anybody, from a retired publican to an old Governor.

Mr. Smith made but little use of the telegraph during his stay. Possibly he laboured under the absurd, though common, delusion that telegrams in a small township soon become public property; anyhow, he did not utilize the wire, but on the return mail after his arrival despatched a bulky, sealed, epistle duly registered, which, on being eagerly scrutinized by the postmaster, was found to be the simply manly address, "John Smith, Esq., Box 60, G.P.O., Sydney."

"I could have smelted his face," said the disappointed lady to an equally curious and disappointed friend who agreed that "it was a shame and should not be allowed for her part she did not believe that there were two John Smiths in Australia."

Meanwhile, as Mr. Smith paid his bill and simply and read and chatted about the season in a most exemplary manner, the landlord of the Royal Hotel resented any impertinent prying, fearing it might annoy his guest and lose him that rare bird of passage, a profitable customer. Mr. Smith, therefore, was, or pretended to be, in ignorance of the burning curiosity he had aroused in the minds of the Balladune gossips.

Fifteen miles from Balladune was one of the few stations in the district to prevent the utter abandonment of that struggling township. It was not a large and flourishing station with artisan water, shearing-machines, a big over-draft, and all the proper equipments of high-class grazing. The owner had worked hard on himself ever since the district was first settled. He had experienced hard and good times, had suffered from drought and flood, had dug on through all with the grim pertinacity of his nature, and now, in spite of the fallen value of stock and stations, was still clear of debt.

He was a gaunt and grizzled man, by name Hemmings. A man who neither spared himself nor his men. The wandering swagman met with but a snarling reception, and his dose of begrudged rations was thrown to him with contempt. As Hemmings' neighbors were treated with little more hospitality, the owner of Red Dyke was by no means popular.

Still, in a certain way, he was much respected. He dealt for his stores locally, and spent what little he did spend in the district. He was scrupulously honest, and above all, his word, for good or evil, was inviolable. So far as was known, he had neither friends nor enemies. True, there were the surprise of the inhabitants of Balladune when he drove into the township, pulled up at the Royal, and demanded to see the mysterious Mr. Smith.

When the two met it was noticed that, though Mr. Smith was seemingly genial to his greeting, Hemmings did not reciprocate. But this was according to his well-known disposition. "We cannot say all we have to say here, without having some long-eared gaby on his knees at the keyhole; you had better come out to my place and stop the night," said the visitor.

Mr. Smith nodded a cheery assent, then slowly drew his finger and thumb round his throat, and with a waggish smile, remarked, "It is safe, I presume?"

The other scowled silently and strode out to his buggy. Smith went up to his room and in less than a minute descended, joined him, and they drove off.

Everyone who had the price of a drink on him went into the bar to discuss the event, still more strange than even the coming of Mr. Smith himself.

"Mark my words," said the pound-keeper, who professed to have made a study of human nature, "there's no love lost on the side of that Hemmings, and it looks me what a simple, affable chap like Smith can have to do with him."

"I've got it," said the storekeeper, smiling the counter. "That's a deep cover, that Smith, for all he's a good-natured one. He's a detective, that's what he is, and he's just gone out to Red Dyke to take Hemmings quietly without any scandal. When he went upstairs," he added, impressive tones, "it was to slip the handcuffs on his pocket."

Everyone finished his drink in solemn silence. "What was so novel and entrancing?" "Wonder what he's done?" said one, somewhat longer at last.

"You may be bound," went on the storekeeper, "by his success, that it was done years and years ago, most likely in some other country."

"This was delightful. Why, it might be another, Deeming to be done."

"He sent a note out to Red Dyke yesterday," said the landlord.

"And you never told us!" cried a reproachful chorus.

"Come," said the pound-keeper, who had been silenced for a while. "If he is a detective, which I don't say he isn't, would he have sent out a note to tell Hemmings he was here?"

This was beyond the reasoning powers of the onlookers, and even the storekeeper left the question unanswered.

III. The two men in the buggy were silent for some time. After leaving the township the road passed for some miles through a dark and barren scrub, Smith uttered the first remark:—

"I was unexpected, I presume?"

"I suppose if a body were deposited a mile or two back in this scrub."

"Before it was found it would be unrecognizable, and put down to some foot-traveller who had lost himself and died of thirst."

"Ah! So much better than burying."

"Quite true," replied the other, who seemed to force himself by strong effort to answer coolly the oblique remarks of his companion.

"Purring is clumsy, but you have not come here to discuss such questions?"

"I have not. I have come to claim the fulfillment of my word."

"After twenty years?" asked Hemmings, in a firm tone.

"After twenty years," repeated Smith, in a toneless way.

There was silence once more, and, in a short while, the buggy emerged on a track of open country, grateful to the eye after the close scrub.

"Supposing we defer further conversation until we reach home—at least, what I now call home? I will fulfil my word."

The other nodded, and not a word more was uttered until the station was reached.

There was little to recommend the place to any one with an eye to comfort or beauty, for the buildings were rude, and Hemmings, in his love of loneliness, had built his own house at some distance from the others; but an expert would at once have recognized the value of the grazing country. Hemmings drove up to an out-house and they dismounted and walked up. When they stood on the verandah, Smith, all whose geniality had departed, turned and looked round.

"You have been alone here for—"

"I have been here fifteen years. Alone—for thirteen."

"Mrs.—ah—Hemmings, then?"

"Lies buried there. The rough life and climate killed her."

"The property is unencumbered, I understand?"

"The property, such as it is, is unencumbered. Listen! I have gone through such hardships on this place, have fought against famine and the elements so fiercely, knowing all the while that at any time the summons from you might come, that I tell you I love it, by the very memory of my sufferings."

"His voice, which had not faltered when he spoke of the death of the woman who should have been, but was not, his wife, trembled at the remembrance of his years of toil."

"I give you your choice. You demand the fulfillment of my vow. I will mortgage this place to the hilt, and work it free once more with this—"

"—or take a change of clothes and a blanket and leave you here, to wander forth in the world. I ask you but one favour, Favers, give me your answer quickly."

The other kept silence for a few moments; then, as if to change the subject, said:

"My name is Smith, just now, as you are now Hemmings. I will give you my answer after to-morrow morning. Meanwhile—not that I mistrust you, in spite of all—I may mention that yesterday I posted to a safe hand a notification of my presence here, and my motive in coming. It will be read if a fortnight elapses without hearing from me, that is, even if you deposit my body to that convenient scrub, I shall soon be missed."

The other waved his hand as though the idea was too contemptuous for serious discussion; and he motioned his unwelcome guest inside and showed him to a rudely-furnished bedroom. "My accommodation is but limited," he remarked, "but as you come of your own accord you must be content with it."

"I shall be satisfied," returned Smith. "I have faced worse since the smash."

"You are then ruined?"

"Or I should not be here."

"I had thought better of you. If your coming had been only inspired by the desire for just vengeance I could have understood it; as it is I must despise the feeling to which you confess."

"I intend to combine business and pleasure," was the calm reply.

It was midnight before Smith, who had retired early, fell into a troubled sleep on his hard bed, almost immediately to awake again. Someone moving in the house had aroused him. In spite of his protestations of confidence his hand stole under his pillow. He listened, and the sound he heard made him arise noiselessly and steal on to the verandah.

In the brilliant moonlight stood Hemmings, gazing out on the familiar scene, the rugged outlines of which not even the silver rays could soften or beautify. But it was his. He had come there when the land was a wilderness, had seen the country alter and become fruitful under his care. He had defied sickness, the barren sky and the devastating storm to dispossess him. It had been to him a refuge from the past and his fellow men.

Smith watched the tall, lean figure shaken with emotion, then he spoke sternly:

"Waiters—I will call you by your own name—I come here only on an errand of business. I intend to turn you out. I am not a ruined man. Let me speak, for the other would have interrupted. 'Nearly 30 years ago you stole my wife from me. You made a fatal mistake. You allowed her, or she did it without your knowledge, to take both money and jewels in her flight. I could have cast you into prison branded as a thief. But you know and I admit, that in the encounter between us you spared my life. Then you swore that at any future time when I demanded it you would strip yourself of all your possessions and give them up to me in tenfold payment of that of which I had been robbed. I knew your character, knew you would keep the vow, although a poor man when you made it, and I thought that it would be sweet vengeance to come—unexpectedly upon you and demand fulfilment. I have come, and what have I found? One sleeps beneath that mound under a name she has no right to—dead, I doubt not, of the remorse which would be stimulated by your solitary life in this waste. You, the other one, a wretched man, I look ten years older. You have not a friend in the world here you will live and die without a companion but those whose services you hire. I am amply revenged. Keep your lonely acres out here. I give you back your promise."

He paused. The dark figure against the moonlit sky said nothing, but put his hands up to his face.

"To-morrow morning," went on the other, quietly relapsing into his natural tone, "send a man to drive me into the township, for you and I must never look on each other again." He turned and re-entered his room.

The Balladune people have never yet accounted for the visit of Mr. Smith.

A "STUMPER."

The Man of the World is responsible for the following cricket yarn:—

"I was," the barrister related, "playing in a cricket match at Mote Park, Maidstone, and was 'flying' in the position assigned to long leg. Suddenly a man in athletic kit hit a swinging blow to leg. I was unable to stop the ball, which would have gone over the boundary had it not been fiddled in a very novel way. A large and ferocious bull-dog, darting out from among the crowd, literally swallowed the cricket ball. I myself and two or three others of the men fielding ran up; we were at a perfect loss to know what to do or how to get the ball. The bull-dog seemed almost apoplectic; but he seemed almost very savage, and there was no means of administering to him an emetic. We stood gazing helplessly, and meanwhile the two men in the wickets were continuing to run steadily, thus increasing the score for our adversaries. It was evident that they neither knew what had taken place, but considered that it was simply an ordinary case of lost ball. Suddenly I had an idea. Seizing the cap from the head of one of my fellow cricketers, I thrust it into the bull-dog's mouth. Instantly, then, I gagged the brute by winding my waist sash lightly round his jaws. He was now helpless. I seized him in my arms and ran with him all my might to the wickets, which I reached when the two men in, who were still running, were both out of block. Indeed, they paid no attention to me, for they only thought that I was drunk or mad to go running about on a cricket field with a bull-dog; they had no idea that that bull-dog contained the lost cricket ball. As I approached the wickets, I called out to the umpire. 'This dog has swallowed the ball. See, here it is.' And so, call his attention to the animal's stomach, called the umpire's attention to the ball. Then, without a moment's hesitation I knocked off the balls with that part of the bull-dog. 'How's that, umpire?' asked the bowler. 'Out,' replied the umpire."

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